

Day and Dusk

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Day and Dusk

by [Morningside](#)

Summary

When the snow finally slows, he sees the statue again – and realizes his mistake. The figure is female, and she holds aloft a star, not a sun. In her other hand is a crescent moon. He has been walking towards the shrine of a Daedra, not the Lord of Light. So far away from civilization – he should have known.

While searching for answers on how to help the Betrayed, Knight-Paladin Gelebor stumbles across Aranea lenith as she keeps her long, lonely vigil at the shrine of Azura. It's all a little too familiar.

Notes

Inspired in part by ognevkafenella's beautiful art imagining Gelebor set free to explore and enjoy the world. Check it out at:

<http://ognevkafenella.tumblr.com/post/175882847273/auri-els-blessing-knight-paladin-gelebor-is-being>

Chapter 1

Auri-El releases him from his service.

He comes to Gelebor in a dream, shining brighter than the dawn, and tells him that his long vigil has ended. The sanctum is purified; he can move on to his next calling.

When he wakes, there is not a shadow of doubt in his mind that this was no ordinary dream.

He has sent the fiery Nord-woman and her vampire companion off to destroy Lord Harkon. He has dragged the bodies of Vyrthur and the Betrayed out of the sanctum, burned them on a great pyre, and released their ashes into the river. He has performed the necessary rites to restore holiness to this place: chanted the prayers, read aloud the ancient covenants, waved a thurible of cleansing incense to the four winds. His duty here is complete.

Now, he can turn whatever years he has left to seeking out whatever spark of hope remains in the Betrayed.

He performs his ablutions a final time out on the balcony, praising his god for all that has been and all that is to be. He leaves his ewer at the foot of the wayshrine's basin, and steps through the portal.

He emerges to a changed world. The Dwemer are gone (and he spits on the memory of their cruel impiety). The Chimer have turned dark and strange, to match their dark and strange hearts. There are Nine Divines, unless there aren't. The Nords stomp across these lands as if they truly own them. Perhaps they do, now.

He calls himself an Altmer to anyone who asks. It hurts his heart, but it is easier than the alternative. "I'm a priest," he says. "Too much time inside has kept me pale." It's not entirely false.

He creeps into the shadowy places where none dare go, down into the lairs of his poor, ruined people. He knows their tricks – their twisting tunnels and poisoned spikes. He is saddened, but he is not afraid.

He watches them from darkened corners, sees the grim parody of a society that they have forged in the dark. They hiss and spin around shaman-like figures covered in rattling bones. They rip apart skeevers with their bare hands and offer the first taste to their heavy-helmeted chiefs. They vivisect chauruses and weave their souls with their still-twitching limbs to craft magical staffs. Gelebor covers his mouth with his hands and tries not to gag.

He whispers to them words in their ancient tongue, croons long-forgotten songs to see if it might awaken some long-buried remnant in them. They hear him, and attack. He kills them. And kills them. And kills them.

He bursts from the darkness, covered the blood of his twisted kin, and weeps into the snow.

He practices his illusion magic on animals. It's been too long; there was no one to charm down in the Chantry. He calms squirrels and foxes, then wolves and bears – then drives a swift dagger through their throats and sells their pelts to the Nords to pay for his food and lodging.

When he starts feeling too many wary glances at him as he drags his latest kill into town, he moves on to the next little hamlet.

At last, he feels ready. He sets out, eyes sharp, until he finds evidence of the Betrayed marking the entrance to a cave. Their idea of totems is gruesome – skulls on sticks, bits of chaurus chitin – but it attests to some measure of intentionality. There is hope in the display. He lifts his hands to the sun, prays for Auri-El's grace, and descends.

He manages to isolate a sister alone in her hut. She is small – adolescent, perhaps. He casts his spell just as she scents him, and her face goes slack. He grabs at her sunken cheeks and softly sings to her about the sun's gleam on the snow, about ancient battles, about their god's guiding light. She jerks and flares her nostrils, fighting the spell, frantic to do him harm.

He casts it again, stronger this time, and sends out a tendril of magic to see if anything in her will respond. Nothing. She huffs and twitches like an animal in his grasp.

He strokes a long finger against her brow in benediction, hoping something in her feels the apology in the gentle touch.

(When was the last time she was touched tenderly? For that matter, when was the last time *he* –?)

He puts her to sleep with a final burst of calm, and sneaks out of the cave.

Radiant Lord, surely this cannot be our final fate.

He wanders then, north and east to where they say the mages of this age tend to a great library. Perhaps he can find answers in there, if he can find none in the hives of the Betrayed.

On a mountaintop near Winterhold, he spots a statue holding high a sunburst. Auri-El. He needs guidance; it has been too long since he last performed his ablutions. He adjusts his pack and makes his way up the slope.

A blizzard descends. He fights his way through it, wrapping himself in spells against the cold that he has known for so long that he no longer remembers learning them.

When the snow finally slows, he sees the statue again – and realizes his mistake. The figure is female, and she holds aloft a star, not a sun. In her other hand is a crescent moon. He has been walking towards the shrine of a Daedra, not the Lord of Light. So far away from civilization – he should have known.

He nearly turns around then and there, but he will not be able to make it back down before nightfall. In his day, the moon and star were icons of Azura, the false Prince who dared lay claim to Auri-El's holy light. She is an abomination, to be sure, but not so foul as some of her brethren. Unless much has changed, her followers will be more likely to offer him hospitality than to kill him in some wicked ritual. And if they indeed prove treacherous...he can think of worse ways to serve Auri-El than to go down fighting servants of Oblivion.

He trudges onward. He tries not to look at the statue.

At the mountaintop shrine, there is no one to be seen. If there was any evidence of recent activity, the snowfall has buried it. But there is a door carved into the base of the massive statue. He knocks. Beneath his coat, he readies a hand on the hilt of his mace.

Almost instantly, the door cracks open to reveal one of the new, red-eyed Chimer. "Welcome, traveler. I am Aranea Ienith, priestess of Azura. Have you..." she looks him up and down, "...come to pay honor to our Lady?"

"And I am Gelebor, Knight-Paladin of Auri-El. I come only seeking shelter, if you will grant it. I

fear I may have gotten a bit off track in the storm.”

“Knight-Paladin of Auri-El,” she echoes, craning her neck up at him. “How...terribly awkward.” The door swings open. “Well, come on in, before all the heat escapes.”

Inside are faded red silks lining the walls, the smell of roses, and very little else. She is already wearing heavy leather boots, as if she was about to head out when he arrived. “Pardon my impatience, but I need to hurry to begin the evening rite. The blizzard has left me with little time. Please, make yourself comfortable until I return. I assume you won’t want to join me.”

Me. Singular. “Is it...only you here? No one else?”

She sighs, her brisk manner cracking. “Not for many years, no.”

He takes in the spareness of the shrine, the oppressive quiet of its doorways, and is pierced by a stab of familiarity. She, too, is alone with her sworn god. For a moment, he wonders if it was Auri-El’s guidance that led him here after all. He almost offers to come along for her ritual, just so she won’t have to perform it alone, but then he remembers: Daedra.

He pulls off his hood. She raises her eyebrows at his appearance, but says nothing. “Your invitation is kind, but I will stay here. Only...do you have any books I might read while you are out? I am...trying to learn more about this land.”

She gestures at a silk-covered doorway. “You’ll find some bookshelves in there. You may peruse whatever you wish. But, *Knight-Paladin of Auri-El*,” her face furrows tight, “if you do anything to abuse my hospitality, if you hurt my texts or in any way desecrate this shrine, I swear you will pay for it in blood.”

He bows deeply. “By my vows to Auri-El, no harm will come to this place by my hand.”

“Good.” She tugs on mittens and pulls a ragged old cloak over her shoulders. “I’ll be back shortly.”

The door opens. The wind howls in, snapping at the red wall coverings. Aranea disappears into the fading light.

As soon as she is gone, he tears toward her library. The Nord-inns had precious little reading, aside from some tired old folk tales. Anything that can tell him what has happened these past four thousand years... His eyes flit past a row of Daedric-runed writings (Auri-El preserve him) and alight on what appears to be a shelf of history books.

The History of the Empire, Vol. 1. He heard the Nords in the taverns speak of an Empire, and some manner of civil war. It seems as good a place as any to start.

He skims the introduction as quickly as his sight will allow, gaze dancing from header to header. Cyrodiil. Saint Alessia. Septim Dynasty. It’s not just here, then – the races of man triumphed over Tamriel. He had suspected as much, though the confirmation still stings. He would linger, but he doesn’t know how much time he has before Aranea returns, and he is not ready to lay his ignorance bare before her.

He should have made Harkon’s rivals stay and explain more of this world before they left, but they were selfish in their mission, just as he was selfish in his. He will need to find his own answers.

The next largest set of volumes on the shelf is titled *The Red Year*. It is an unfamiliar term, but the bulk of the books suggests that this year was something important. He pulls out the first tome.

From what he can gather from the introduction, Morrowind, old Resdayn, is gone – destroyed in some cataclysmic eruption of the Red Mountain. That should be enough for now, he should move on –

But on the following pages are the stories of survivors. Of fire, of flight, of digging through rubble. Stories of heroism and cowardice. Stories of incomprehensible loss. He cannot tear himself away because he *knows* these stories, even if the details are new. *And then Ysgramor's armies came to repay us for the crime of Saarthal, and our defenses could not hold, so we ran and ran, though we knew not where we fled.*

These blasphemous Dunmer had lost the sun too, in their own way. Not forever, but long enough for them to choke on the air and sink into the ground and boil in the sea.

And so Aranea Ienith must be here in Skyrim because...

She knows what it is to lose her home. She knows what it is for her people to die by the thousands and tens of thousands.

And now she is here, all alone, at her shrine.

The old pain of loss, four thousand years buried, bubbles up in him until he is drowning in it, and she finds him with his face buried in the crook of his arm.

“Gelebor, I’m back. I –” she pauses, silk covering in her hand. “Are you quite alright?”

“Your people,” he emerges from behind his arm. It takes great effort to open his eyes. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

She takes the book from his hand. “The Red Year? That was two hundred years ago. And Azura led me to safety after the fall of Baar Dau.” She looks at him quizzically. “What in Oblivion do they teach you in the Dominion?”

“I’m not...” he shakes his head, uncomfortable at his display. “It’s only that I know what it is like to lose my home. Reading the words of the survivors...you have my sympathies.”

“Ah,” she murmurs knowingly. “A Thalmor refugee, then? I’m sorry for your loss, though I must say it’s a comfort to know that you won’t be bringing Justiciars down on my head.” She hands the book back to him. “Take your time. I’ll go prepare dinner.”

He doesn’t open the book again, only sits under his ball of magelight and tries to compose himself until he hears her calling his name.

Across a table built for many more bodies, she hands him a plate of some fresh flatbread covered in simmered snowberries. He dips an experimental spoon into the sauce. It is sweet and tart and very spicy.

She sees him flinch at the taste and grimaces. “You must forgive me that I cannot offer you better fare, sera. My people in Windhelm pay for goods to be delivered up here every few weeks, so there’s not much fresh food to be had. It is not luxurious, but I survive – better than many of them do. Their devotion does them proud.”

“Any meal offered in hospitality is a feast. You need not apologize,” he says, as graciously as he knows how. He is embarrassed that he has embarrassed his host. “And besides that, it tastes good. I just wasn’t expecting such powerful flavors.” The spices assail his tongue, so used to blandness. He does not tell her that he lived for millennia on mushrooms and blind subterranean fish. Auri-El

provided, but he did not provide abundantly.

They eat mostly in silence. She is a little too careful in how she brings her bread to her mouth, a little too stiff on her bench. She's unused to company. That's fine; so is he.

She steals glances at him across the table, suspicion and sympathy alternately flicking across her dark features. Her face is hard and craggy in the candlelight. She doesn't look young; he suspects that an onlooker would think her his elder.

She finishes before he does, pushing the basket of remaining flatbread toward him. He accepts with a grateful murmur. She stands and grabs a heavy bucket from near the fireplace, then disappears towards the shrine's vestibule. When she returns, the bucket is full of snow. She hangs it from a bar in the fireplace, then blasts it with a jet of flames until it is melted and steaming.

So it would appear that the Chimer's descendants still have an affinity for fire.

By the time that she has finished, he is mopping up the last bit of the sauce. Wordlessly, she collects their plates and dunks them into the water.

"May I be of assistance?" he offers.

"No. Stay." She flashes him a half-smile. "I can't have you telling your fellow devotees of Auriel that I was a poor host."

His own lips quirk in answer. "I wouldn't dream of it." Nonetheless, he pushes his spoon and cup toward her so she can grab them with ease.

"You said that you've been here a long time?" he asks her as she fetches them.

"Ever since Azura led us out of Morrowind. I helped lay these foundations." She grabs a rag as if to get to scrubbing, then seems to think better of it and drapes the cloth over the edge of the bucket. She returns to the table. "Almost as soon as we had made it to safety, we began to build this shrine as a symbol of our gratitude and perseverance. And to repent, of course, of the Tribunal. Extraordinary waywardness demanded an extraordinary return." She says that last bit with an edge to her voice, as if daring him to challenge her. He might take the bait, if only he had any idea what she was talking about.

"That makes...two hundred years, then?"

She cocks her head at him. "Two centuries, yes."

"And how much of that on your own?" He tries not to look too hungry for the answer.

"Close on fifty years. There were others, as you can see, but they could not bear Azura's visions of things to come, so one by one they left, until there was only me."

Two hundred years on this snow-whipped peak, fifty of them alone. It is nothing compared to his four millennia of service, and yet...

"Again, you have my sympathies. I had a lonely calling, once, in service to Auri-El."

She raises an eyebrow at him. "I didn't know that Auriel asked for hermits."

"He doesn't. There were others, at first." She presses her knuckles to her mouth. "My companions died, but my oaths bound me to my post."

“I...see. How long?”

“A very long time.”

“And now?” She looks rapt.

“My duty has been fulfilled. I am free to go where I will.”

Her Oblivion-touched eyes go soft. “Then you are quite welcome here, for as long as you wish.”

Chapter 2

The blizzard returns with a vengeance in the night. For days, the sky dumps great drifts down on them. It is not for nothing that Gelebor is called a snow elf – he has his tricks for cutting his way through a storm – but he has no need to risk such a venture. He stays.

The setting is...less than ideal, but Auri-El's virtues can shine even in this place: patience and high-mindedness and compassion. He assists Aranea with what his conscience will permit and tries to stay out of the way for that which he finds intolerable. She starts holding herself a little less stiffly around him.

Still, they give each other their space. They know each other to be kindred spirits of a sort, thanks to his half-confession about his years of service, but still – he does not belong here, and they are both wary of upsetting their truce.

Twice a day, before the sun has risen and again near dusk, he helps her forge a path up to the altar at the top of the stairs. At noon, he steps outside to chant his own mantras on the platform outside the door, his back to the apostate altar looming above.

On the second day, the clouds briefly part to reveal the sun, pure and white. He lifts his voice out over the mountainside and glories in the open air.

When he is done, he turns to see Aranea watching him from the door.

“That wasn't Aldmeris.”

“No, it wasn't.” He comes inside.

As he hangs up his coat, he ponders. There is no hiding his strangeness, not in quarters this close. If she does not already suspect that he is something other than a misbred Altmer, she will soon. And...he wants her to understand. She might, if anyone can.

He takes a deep breath and meets her weathered face. “It was my native tongue. Falmeris.”

She blinks, taking in his features anew. “Blessed Azura. You're...Falmer?”

“I prefer the term ‘snow elf.’ The word Falmer has not applied to my people for many centuries.” He has said it dozens of times before, to would-be champions of Auri-El's bow, but it feels different this time, now that he is out in the world.

“Snow elf, then,” she says faintly, and reaches a wondering hand out to his arm. “May I?” He nods, and she trails her fingers down his skin as if verifying that he is flesh and blood. He erupts into chills at the touch.

Her fingers reach his wrist, and she grabs his hand between her own. “You really are telling the truth, aren't you? How long was it? How did you...” she trails off.

“Last I saw Tamriel, your people were still golden, and the Dwemer yet toiled beneath the earth. Auri-El kept me alive to fulfill my duty to my people's most sacred shrine.”

“You said that duty has now been fulfilled?”

At his nod, her hands squeeze tighter around his own. “I have only just been sent out, that I may

serve a new purpose.”

She has many questions. He has even more. Cloistered away from the snow, they share everything they know about the world that was and the world that is. She brings him stacks of books and cups of some unfamiliar tea. He repays her with tales of the ancient Chimer.

They talk through the night, until they need to rouse themselves to clear away the snow. Once inside, they collapse on their beds, then wake up to talk some more.

Once they have shared all that they have to tell, they do what priests have done since the beginning of time: they argue.

It starts innocuously enough. He wants to know more about what the Chimer faith has become in his absence. Seated across the dining table from him, she answers patiently, though her jaw goes tight as she describes the Tribunal that led her people even further astray.

They can both agree that these false gods who fell prey to the same temptations as the Dwemer were wicked – but they cannot discuss the Tribunal without discussing the Daedra in whose shrine they reside.

“May I ask you something about Azura’s place in all this?” She raises an eyebrow but hums her assent. “You say that she cursed your people to look as you do so that you would not forget the past. The ancient wrong has been righted. Why does she not now restore you?”

“Restore us?” she snorts. “What, to a bunch of renegade Altmer? Her touch was a curse then, yes... a sort of punishment – but it’s just as much a blessing.”

“Pity that your faith does not teach you to see the difference between the two.”

“And what does that mean?”

That...came out a bit stronger than he intended, but if he is going to understand this world, understand her... And he does remain consecrated to Auri-El. It is his duty to carry that light wherever he goes. “From all that you’ve told me, it seems to be a pattern with your people. Your so-called ‘Good’ Daedra hurt you, and convince you that the harm is help. Even your own gift of visions – what kind of gift drives its recipients to despair?”

She crosses her arms on the table. “Is that a question, or just an ill-informed lecture?”

“I serve the god of light,” he answers firmly. “I cannot understand why anyone would choose to worship a half-god of half-light, who cannot help but mix evil in with the good.”

She gives him a look of utter scorn. “Choose? You think that piety has anything to do with choice?”

“What, would you claim that it is compelled?”

“Our gods are *ours* because they chose *us*. Whether you call them good or evil is beside the point. They stand with us, and they shape us into who we need to be.”

“By cursing you?”

She spreads her hands. “Our chosenness, it’s neither a blessing nor a curse. It is simply who we are. We were chosen to be different, and we bear that with pride. I would not change it for all the world.”

She sounds earnest, but he cannot simply let Daedra-worship stand unchallenged. “Your ancestors were apostate, but you need not be trapped by their mistakes. The Aedra could shape you into something different, if you desired. Their goodness is freely given to all. They would not inflict such suffering.”

The whiff of proselytization makes her curl her nose. “Oh, you and your Aedra! Distant and pure! What good does all their goodness do you?”

“You would call Auri-El distant, when he sustained me for four millennia?”

She flinches at the reminder, but carries on. “But what of the rest of your people? For all their faithfulness, where was Auri-El in your time of need?”

“You know that’s not how the Aedra work. Their sphere – ”

“Their sphere is not our own. Precisely! Which is better, Knight-Paladin: to be cursed, or to be abandoned?”

Blasphemous words. Heretical words. And worse than that, words that *hurt*. He is jolted out of the warm little shrine and to the Betrayed where they are imprisoned underground, lightless and godless, *abandoned*.

He surges to his feet. She responds in kind, but cannot match his height. He glowers down at her, teeth bared: “Auri-El has not – !”

The retort catches in his throat. Something about it feels strange. His racing pulse, the arguments marshalling at the back of his throat –

It’s been a very long time since he’s done this.

A long time since he got to indulge in the back-and-forth of a dispute. Travelers would sometimes shout at him, curse, try to attack him when he set their task before them – but not once did they truly challenge him. Certainly not on theological matters.

And now here he is, feuding with a heathen priestess – and it feels good and *free*.

He bursts into laughter. She looks up at him, offended. “Do you find something amusing?”

“No, no, it is only...when is the last time you had a good debate?”

She blinks owlishly, then dissolves into laughter as well. He joins her, relieved that the tension has shattered. “Squabbling like a pair of missionaries with something to prove!” she gasps. “Oh, and here I was half-ready to kick you out into the snow!”

“Well, would you like to keep going? Aedra against Daedra, may the best pantheon win?”

Smiling, she ducks her head, then looks back up at him. Her eyes shine with warmth, though there is a sad crease to her brow. “Thank you, Gelebor.”

“What, for insulting your patron?”

“It feels good to laugh with someone.”

Oh. Yes. This is unfamiliar as well. His breath catches in his throat.

He must look as stricken as he feels, because she leans across the table and lays a gentle hand on

his shoulder. "As I said: thank you. I think we've both been denied many things, for many years. It is good to share them now." She pulls back and makes her way to the pantry shelf in the room's corner. "So as long as we're making exceptions," she rummages around and procures a very dusty bottle from the back. "Greef."

"Greef?" he asks, feeling the shape of the ridiculous word.

"It was once a very popular beverage in Morrowind. Brandy, from Vvardenfell's native comberries. It's hard to get now, especially up here. I only consume it on special occasions." A relic of her ruined homeland.

"I would share it with you now, if you would join me. Does Auriel permit you to drink?"

"There was precious little supply in the Chantry, but no, it is not barred."

"Good, good."

She places a pair of cups on the table and sits down, this time beside him on his bench. Her arm presses against his, worn blue sleeve on his skin. The heat from her body spreads and curls across his chest and down into his gut. *Denied many things*, indeed.

As she uncorks the bottle, he shifts so that his leg touches hers. She does not pull away.

Instead, she puts down the greef and gives him a long, considering look. Her head tilts. A smile plays at the corners of her mouth. "Tell me, Knight-Paladin:" she says in a low voice, "is there anything else that your vows forbid you?" She places her palm on his upper thigh, her meaning unmistakable.

He wraps a hand around the nape of her neck. She sighs and leans into the touch. "Not this."

He twists his fingers into her hair and draws himself down to her. Cautiously, their lips meet.

It has been a long time for this also, for both of them. They can take their time now.

They drink their greef, their bodies slowly melding together: his arm around her waist, her ankle hooked behind his. Her thumb rubs circles into his thigh. His hand strokes up and down the lean curve of her hip. They teach each other toasts from their homelands and drink to their health, to their gods, to friends long gone. He pushes down the cowl of her robe so he can kiss at her neck, feeling her throaty hums of pleasure against his lips. A sheen of sweat is forming on her skin. He licks at it and hears her gasp.

When he moves to unbutton the clasp at her shoulder, she grabs his face and kisses him deeply. "Bed," she sighs against his mouth.

He undresses her – slowly, slowly. Her face may be hard from the wind and cold, but her body beneath her robes is silken on his fingertips. Her strange skin is covered in stranger tattoos – starbursts and interlocking triangles and swirls that converge on her breasts and navel and sex. He kisses the designs, and it feels like a benediction.

His own skin is unadorned, but marred with scars. He no longer pays them any mind, but she maps them out with her fingers as she licks and nips at his collarbones and chest.

She huffs out a little laugh into his neck.

"What is it?"

“I keep expecting you to be as cold as alabaster. You certainly look it.” She presses herself flush against him. “It’s a pleasure to be proven wrong.” Her stomach is soft and welcoming against his cock. He rolls his hips against her – she grabs at his ass and pulls him in tighter.

He guides her down to the bed, covers her body with his own. Soon they are side-by-side, their limbs entangled, their hands teasing at long-neglected skin. He keeps pulling himself back to watch how they move together. Their bodies are mesmerizing against each other, ash-dark and snow-bright. He marvels at the sight of her hand around his cock, until a particularly clever twist of her hand forces him to throw back his head.

She works him until he is panting, then settles herself over his waist. When she rides him, his hands are sunbursts on her hips.

He can’t look away. He can’t let go.

He spends himself inside her, then buries his mouth between her legs until she is coming with a sob, thighs tight around his ears, fingers tight in his hair.

Afterward, they extinguish the candles and lie together, her smaller body curled into his side. It isn’t love. It isn’t even passion. But it is connection, and that is more than enough.

He is contentedly letting go of consciousness when he feels her shift against him. She takes a deep, shaking breath and whispers into the warm darkness, “There’s something else we have in common. I’ve been released from my service as well.”

He lays a hand on her thigh to show that he is listening.

She pauses and tightens her arm across his chest before continuing. “Azura...I accomplished what she wanted me here to do. And then she told me that my visions were at an end. She is done speaking to me.”

“How long?” It seems to be their question.

“Almost two years now. I’ve stayed here because I don’t know what else I would do.”

The word *abandoned* comes to mind, but he is not so cruel as to say it. “I’m sorry. It’s hard when they make demands of you. It’s even harder when they stop.”

“It’s lonely.”

He kisses her hair. “Yes, it is.”

They fall asleep wrapped in each other.

At long last, the blizzard passes. He helps her clear her steps one last time, then announces that he needs to move on to Winterhold as soon as the sun has risen. He promises to send her a shipment of alchemical supplies from the College while he is there.

She thanks him, but turns away.

He doesn’t have much to pack. He’s almost ready to leave by the time he hears her return inside.

He goes to meet her in the vestibule.

She throws back her hood and announces, “I need you to wait an extra day.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m coming with you, and I need time to prepare.” She is not asking his permission.

He has to admit, he wasn’t expecting that. “What, to help the Betrayed?”

Her shrug is nonchalant, her gaze intense. “It seems as good a mission as any, and you need someone with you who knows something about this age. Plus,” her mouth quirks, “we still haven’t finished our debate on the relative merits of Daedra and Divines.”

He is used to his solitude. He is not sure he is ready for a traveling companion yet. But the only alternative is isolation – his...and hers.

“What of your shrine?”

“I’ll send word to Windhelm that they can stop sending me food. If Azura desires an attendant, she can choose someone else. I’m ready to go.” There are no taking back words like that.

“I hope you don’t mind caves.”

She snorts. “Anything that’s shelter from the snow.”

And that settles it.

Their lovemaking that night is more hesitant. They are newly unsure of each other, of what *this* is, but it is a weightier thing now. Aranea bites her uncertainty his skin and smiles at him with burning eyes when she sees the purple marks it leaves behind.

In the morning, he waits outside while she performs the necessary rites to close the shrine. He can smell the incense even through the closed door.

The sunlight sparkles on the fresh snowdrifts – Auri-El’s light flashing forth from above and below and all around him. That, he was once taught, is the blessing of living in the snow: it makes it impossible to ignore how divinity is refracted in all things. The world shines with sacred promises, even in the least likely places.

The drone of Aranea’s chanting stops. She comes out her door, casts a sealing rune on it, then bows to it a final time.

He hands her a walking stick. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

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